

"I asked Dr. Von Eschenbach repeatedly about the FDA's food safety operations, especially about any changes they plan to make in light of last fall's E. coli outbreak. While I was pleased to hear the commissioner strongly endorse fresh fruits and vegetables as essential to a healthy American diet, he unfortunately appeared to be unprepared to answer my questions satisfactorily. The FDA has known they would have to come before Congress to justify their future budget; it's a mystery why they would come before us with so few concrete answers," commented Farr after the hearing.

When pressed by Farr, Von Eschenbach agreed that the FDA would work out crisis protocols with the agriculture industry in an effort to both ensure the public's health and treat the industry responsibly during any future food-borne illness outbreaks. While Von Eschenbach assured Farr that the FDA's request for an additional \$10.6 million for food safety would be spent on specialty crops, he could not explain why the FDA was requesting just one tenth of the increase in food safety funding that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is requesting. The FDA regulates 80 per cent of the food supply while the USDA regulates the other 20 per cent.

"It has been five full months since the E. coli outbreak in fresh spinach that was linked to the Salinas Valley. Our spinach producers have been working hard to restore consumer confidence in their product, but the FDA has yet to release their report about what happened. When I asked Dr. Von Eschenbach about the report, he could not tell me when it would be ready. When I asked him when the FDA would be willing to share the information they've gained from past investigations into food-borne illnesses from packaged salads, he again couldn't answer."

Farr added, "The FDA is a critical agency, and they do good work, both protecting consumers and working with the industry. But frankly, I expected them to be much better prepared for the hearing today. I know the commissioner agrees with me that encouraging U.S. consumers to eat fresh produce is critical to the health of all Americans. I want to work with him to make sure our food safety operation is the best it can be. But if the FDA continues to be reticent about working with Congress, we will have a tough budget process ahead of us."

Yesterday's hearing was the Agriculture and FDA Appropriations Subcommittee's first spending oversight hearing. The committee will hold several more hearings before putting together their bill outlining how USDA and FDA funds will be spent in the coming year.